What’s in a Name?

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The co-chairman of my Institutional Biosafety Committee knows how to yank my chain: He laughs as he refers to me as Duke’s “Biological Safety Officer” (BSO). He knows I absolutely abhor that title. The term BSO undoubtedly originates from the NIH Recombinant DNA Guidelines, and probably as an outgrowth of the Radiation Safety Officer (RSO) whose job is to enforce the regulations of the Nuclear Regulatory Commission. But does it really apply to us?

I have been prompted to challenge the appropriateness of this title as we also change the name and format of our Journal. After all, what is ABSA’s vision? It is to be “[the] leader in the profession of biological safety,” not “[the] leader in the enforcement of biological safety!” Do we have the right to call ourselves professionals versus officers? Let’s look at who we are and what we do.

I recently reviewed this year’s ABSA directory and found that approximately 30% of the membership works in University or Research settings, 23% in Pharmaceutical or Biotechnology Industries, 12% in Testing or Technology Control Companies, 9% in Medical Centers, and <6% in a variety of other settings including government, public health departments, consulting, animal or veterinary services, architecture, firefighting, the American Red Cross, and even OSHA. Clearly, we are diverse in our workplaces, as well as in our responsibilities.

What topics or issues are we asked to address in our jobs? Are we responsible only for interpreting and enforcing existing regulations or guidelines? I think not. Issues for many of us include such diverse topics as bioterrorism response, responses to latex sensitivities, implementation of safer sharps devices, indoor air quality (bioaerosols), transgenic animals, facility design and containment, risk assessments, statistics, effective training methods, medical surveillance, performance improvement, program management, and customer service. Doesn’t this indicate that we have grown from quoting the exact Federal Register pages, CFRs, title, and verse to working with our customers as partners to evaluate the risks (perceived and real) of the workplace and develop rational, mutually acceptable, hazard prevention strategies?

Does ABSA help to foster this professionalism? Absolutely! Take a look at some of the topics that we study in our preconference courses and conference proceedings—toxins, genetic therapies, GMPs and GLPs, hazardous materials transportation, microbial contamination of buildings, arboviruses, containment for large-scale production of microorganisms, polio virus eradication, emerging pathogens, smallpox vaccine for bioterrorism threats, and the “art” of biosafety audits. Look at the publication you are holding. The Publications Committee has insured that we have a very practical source of state-of-the-art, information and diversity of biosafety issues to help us do our jobs, hence the name change to Applied Biosafety. As professionals, we should be contributing to the success of our Journal.

Our registration and certification programs are other ways we can document our professionalism. However, only about 15% of our membership has been registered as RBPs or certified as CBSPs. I challenge the rest of you to set this documentation as a personal goal. Take ABSA or ASM courses, or even take some more college courses to meet the requirements. If you are already registered or certified, be proud to use these credentials!

We have come a long way to gain respect and credibility and to partner with our renowned customers. Let us continue down this path of professionalism. Take courses on topics you know nothing about...you
may find you become the expert in your workplace! Enhance your CV by writing articles for the Journal! And, if you now have the title BSO, consider a name change—Biological Safety Specialist, Consultant, Advisor, etc. What we call ourselves is how we are perceived!

Call me enthusiastic about our newly formatted Journal, our organization, and our profession...just don’t call me a BSO!